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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the evaluative research of the Palm Beach County, Florida School Districts Youth Court Trial Program. Youth or teen courts have been implemented as an alternative measure to juvenile courts for handling adolescents who committed delinquent acts, usually for the first time. The purpose of the applied research was to identify strengths and weaknesses of the program while determining if stated program goals were met. Based upon the findings of the study, it appears that the Youth Court Program is working. It is noted that the educational role of youth courts is to inform and educate young people about the law in our democracy and their role as active citizens. Paralleling the goals of schools, youth courts strive to provide participants with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be positive and active contributors to our society. (Contains 26 references and 3 tables.) (GCP)

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Youth Court: Advocating for all Children

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Introduction

This paper describes the evaluative research of the Palm Beach County, Florida School District's Youth Court Trial Program. The purpose of the applied research was to identify strengths and weaknesses of the program while determining if stated program goals were met.

History of Youth Courts

Until the end of the 19th Century, no court system was designed to hear cases involving juveniles. In most instances, the courts treated adolescents as adults. This philosophy changed in 1899, when the Illinois legislature created the first juvenile court. Specifically, the legislature directed the goals of these special courts to focus on the "care, custody, and discipline" of children (Stevenson, Larson, Carter, Gombay, Terman, & Behrman, 1996). During the next decade, the number of juvenile courts spread to nearly half the states in the union, as well as, the District of Columbia. State legislatures, during this time, believed children differed from adults in their social and moral development (Edwards, 1996; Kohlberg, 1969).

Despite the initial effectiveness of the courts during the first half of the 20th century, larger social trends and problems impacted the system. This included the persistence of child poverty, increased violence in American society, and the significant change in the family structure (Moore, 1996). Consequently, the juvenile courts expanded their jurisdiction over status offenses, such as truancy, running away from home, and other actions beyond the control of parents (Edwards, 1996). Furthermore, researchers argued the juvenile court's interventions did not decrease recidivism (McCarthy, 1989; Datesman & Aickin, 1984; Kelley, 1983; Meade, 1973). In addition, professionals perceived the court as ineffective because of its inability to handle the increasing number of cases in a short time (Stevenson, et al., 1996). Consequently, policymakers implemented Youth or Teen Courts as an alternative measure for handling adolescents who committed delinquent acts, usually for the first time (Beck, 1997; Godwin, 1996).

The literature is not definite as to when the youth courts began their existence. In an effort to trace the beginning of youth court programs, the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) claimed that anecdotal reports indicate that the first teen court began operating in Horseheads, New York in 1968

(APPA, 1999). However, APPA also mentions that one of the earliest known programs, Grand Prairie Teen Court Program, was established in Grand Prairie, Texas in 1976 (APPA, 1999). Despite these conflicting accounts, most researchers agreed that the oldest peer court comparable to current versions generally is held to have been established in Odessa, Texas in 1983 (Zehner, 1997; Beck, 1997; Godwin, 1996). In 1997, approximately 250 youth court programs existed in 30 states (Zehner, 1997). In 1999, there were 565 documented youth court programs in 46 states and the District of Columbia (APPA, 1999).

Florida had 48 youth court programs operating in 1999(APPA, 1999). In 1997, the Florida Association of Teen Courts (FATC) was created to provide a communication and education network for all the teen courts throughout the state. FATC is a non-profit organization committed to advancing the work of youth courts by providing, but not limiting to the following services:

- Delivering an educational intervention program which will ensure the community that juveniles are accountable for their actions.
- Providing all participants the opportunity to benefit from the rewards of community service through volunteerism, while reinforcing responsible and productive behavior through exposure to positive role modes.
- Preventing further delinquent behavior by providing fair consequences in a constructive manner.
- Educating all participants regarding the judicial process.
- Introducing potential career opportunities and life skill development.

History of the Palm Beach County Youth Program

In Palm Beach County, Florida, the Palm Beach County School District Police Department piloted its first youth court program in 1995. Students were recruited from the northern section of the county's public and private schools to serve as bailiffs, jurors, and attorneys. The School District and Jupiter Police Departments through their "First Offender" Programs provided the defendants for the Youth Court. Results from the pilot program found the youth court was successful for the defendants with a reported 4% recidivism rate (W. Roy, personal communication, June 16, 1999). It also provided a positive community experience for the student volunteers. The pilot's success led to the expansion of a Youth Court in the South County Courthouse. Today, the program operates in four of the County's courthouses. During 1996, the court held 368 cases, and had a reported recidivism rate of less than 5% (W. Roy, personal

communication, June 16, 1999). An increase in the number of cases handled by the Youth Court Program has been realized since its inception in 1995.

Description of Palm Beach County Youth Court Trials.

The Youth Court Program is coordinated by the Palm Beach County School District Police Department in cooperation with Palm Beach County Circuit Court Judges, State Attorney's Office, Public Defender's Office, Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, Local Police Agencies, Palm Beach County Bar Association, Local Private Attorneys and other Palm Beach County Officials. The Palm Beach County School District Police Department funds the Youth Court personnel, other support staff, supplies and other costs. Court Administration and the Palm Beach County Board of County Commissioners continue to provide the facilities for trials.

The Youth Court Trials for Juvenile First Offenders (JFO) are held in four courthouses. The trials are held from 6:00 PM to 8:30 PM three nights per week and are coordinated by a Palm Beach County School Police Officer who has a title of Juvenile First Offender Officer (JFOO).

In addition to the salaried individuals, many volunteers assist with the Youth Court Trials. Judges, attorneys, jurors, clerks, and bailiffs are the roles that volunteers serve. The cases are heard by a Palm Beach County Judge and a jury of the defendant's peers determines the consequences. Student attorneys defend and prosecute the cases. Additionally, attorneys from the State Attorney's Office attend the trials and critique the student attorneys' performance.

The youth volunteers must meet certain criteria in order to participate in the Youth Court Program. All volunteers must be enrolled in a public or private school and have a passing grade point average. In order to serve as a student attorney, the youth must be in grades 9-12. Clerks, jurors and bailiffs must be in grades 6-12.

The Juvenile First Offenders (JFO) range in age from seven to eighteen years. Participants must be first time offenders charged with misdemeanors and minor non-violent felony offenses. The first offender must admit guilt and waive due process to participate. Additionally, the victim involved in the offense, must agree to the JFO's participation in the Youth Court Trial Program. If the victim denies the JFO's participation, the case is referred to the State Attorney's Office.

In addition to the sanctions that are given to the JFO at Youth Court trials, participation in other support services may be required. For example, if the youth is in need of counseling and the jurors do not identify this as a sanction, the judge or JFO officer may add this sanction. There are several agencies identified that provide supportive services for the JFOs for things like in-house drug treatment (High Ridge, Eagle Academy, Growing Together), anger management, and Youth Services for counseling (W. Roy, Personal Communication, June 16, 1999).

To ascertain whether the Youth Court Program was meeting its goals and to identify strengths and weaknesses, a program evaluation was conducted during the spring of 1999. The goals of the Youth Court Program for the 1999 fiscal year were as follows:

1. Increase the number of youth referred to Youth Court Trials via a Juvenile First Offender Program.
2. Provide regular community service activities on Saturdays.
3. Increase home and school visits to Youth Court defendants.
4. Recruit and train more volunteers.
5. Offer parents/guardians and defendants assistance in obtaining services ordered by jury/mediator if they cannot afford the total payment or otherwise cannot access the necessary services.
6. Provide the Chief of Police with a detailed report on accomplishments of the Youth Court Program in FY99 by August 1, 1999.

In an effort to accomplish the evaluation research and provide the Chief of Police a final report, the researchers developed an evaluation design. The following sections describe the methodology and design of the evaluation.

Evaluation Methodology

Evaluation Questions

The purposes of this program evaluation were multiple. These purposes are operationalized by the following questions.

1. Did the Youth Court Trial Program meet its goals?
2. What were the program outcomes?
3. How were these outcomes achieved?
4. What were the strengths of the program?

5. What were the areas for program improvement?

The design selected for the use in the evaluation of the Youth Court Trial Program was applied research. Applied research is typically used for assessing problems and answering broad questions. It's practical nature, uses theory as an instrument, and explores multiple levels of analysis (Bickman & Rog, 1998).

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to collect the data. To obtain concrete data to answer the evaluation questions about program outcomes and processes, such as the demographics of the juvenile first offender population, recidivism rates, and the type and kind of follow-up with JFO's, quantitative methods were selected. On the other hand, qualitative interviews and observations of the trials allowed the evaluation team to ascertain the "how" behind the program's outcomes and processes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.5). By using dual methodology, multiple levels of data were collected and analyzed thereby further enhancing the validity of the evaluation through triangulation (Silverman, 1993; Bickman & Rog, 1998).

The subsequent sections in this paper explain the practical aspects of evaluation, the theoretical framework selected for beginning data analysis, and the multiple levels of analysis that were conducted.

Theoretical Framework

In addition to an overall design that provided the methodology for the evaluation, a theoretical framework was used. Using such a framework further structured the evaluation, facilitated the data analysis, and provided coding categories for qualitative data (Maxwell, 1998). The framework used in this program evaluation was a modification of Herman, Morris, and Fitz-Gibbon's (1987) two by two matrix (see figure 1.) which allowed for the examination of program outcomes and processes. Furthermore, the matrix allows for this examination to occur on two levels, summative and formative, and therefore facilitated the identification of commendations and recommendations. Therefore, the framework addressed the practical value of the research. From the point of view of theoretical value, the framework provided a beginning structure for qualitative data analysis to support the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), facilitating the identification of discrepancies and negative cases (Maxwell, 1998). In addition, using a theoretical framework promotes external validity (Silverman, 1993).

Figure 1. Two by Two Matrix

Theoretical Framework	Outcomes	Process
Formative Evaluation	Problems/Improvements with outcomes	Problems/Improvement in process
Summative Evaluation	Effectiveness at meeting outcomes	Effectiveness of Process

Data Sources

Quantitative Techniques. In order to determine if the Youth Court Trial Program met its objectives, quantitative data was collected on several dimensions that related to the evaluation questions. The Youth Court Program Manager and staff developed a computer database to collect data on these dimensions, which are itemized as sub-questions.

1. Did the Youth Court Trial Program meet its 1998-1999 goals?
   a. What was the number of youngsters who participated in Youth Court Trial Program during the year as defendants?
   b. What was the frequency and type of community service activities provided on Saturday?
   c. What was the number of home/school visits to Youth Court Trial Program defendants?
   d. What was the number of youngsters who participated in Youth Court Trial Program as community service participants?
   e. What was the number of volunteers recruited and trained for Youth Court Trial Program during the year?
   f. What was the number of parent(s) or guardian(s) provided with assistance in obtaining services ordered by the jury if they could not afford the total payment or otherwise could not access the necessary services?
2. What were the program outcomes?
   a. What was the number of youngsters who participated in youth Court Trial Program as defendants, by type of offense?
   b. What was the number of sanctions by the type of offense, and the number of sanctions completed?
   c. What was the number of defendants who completed their sanctions?
   d. What was the number and type of Youth Court Trial Program follow-up activities?
   e. What was the recidivism rate for Youth Court Trial Program for each year of the program operation?

Qualitative Techniques. Interviews were the primary source of qualitative data, with observer's comments and field notes providing triangulation for the reliability of data collection (Kirk & Miller, 1986 as cited by Silverman, 1993). The major purpose of the interviews was to understand the participants' perceptions of the program outcomes and processes. Those perceptions were used to answer the following three evaluation questions: How were these outcomes achieved? What were the strengths of the program? What were the areas identified for program improvement? The subsequent paragraphs describe the recruitment of participants, interview protocol development, interview procedures, and data analysis techniques.

Recruitment of Interview Participants. The interview participants were recruited from various role groups that constituted the participating persons in the Youth Court Trial Program. Figure 2 depicts the number of participants interviewed by characteristics: youth and adult participants.

Figure 2. Number of Participants Interviewed: Youth and Adult Participants

Judges	Juvenile First Offender Officer			Student Attorneys	Juvenile First Offender
	Deputy Sheriff	School District Police	County Police		
1	2	1	1	2	4

The recruitment process was the result of scheduling. The Youth Court Manager identified the court dates for interviews and observation and notified the court officers. In addition, the researcher discussed the purposes of the interview with the consenting adults prior to conducting them. Student participants, JFO's and the parents/guardians of the JFO's were recruited during the Youth Court Trial sessions. A signed informed consent document was obtained from each person interviewed.

Interview Protocols. The interview protocols were based on the Youth Court Trial Program's evaluation questions. Once questions were established, they underwent expert review in order to insure validity (Krueger, 1998).

Interview Procedure. The procedure for conducting the interview was semi-structured interview conversations (Fetterman, 1998) ranging from thirty to sixty minutes in duration to obtain rich descriptions of the program's outcomes and processes. Interviews were conducted during the Youth Court Trial sessions to insure that the participants' recollections were not faded by time (Fetterman, 1998). All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, with the observers comments added. Field notes were also made at the time of the interviews and observations of trial proceedings and later transcribed.

Interview Data Analysis. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used for data analysis, which allowed the data to be arranged into categories to facilitate comparisons across the interviews (Maxwell, 1998). Transcripts, observer's comments, and field notes were coded via chunking. That is, a chunk was defined by "the content of the text, shifts in the meaning within the text, and the 'stand alone' rule--the chunk made sense when separated from the rest of the text" (LeBlanc & Shelton, 1997, pp. 37-38). After themes were inductively generated from the chunks, a search for "discrepant evidence or

negative cases" was conducted to insure the validity of the data analysis (Maxwell, 1998, p.93). Following the process, the theoretical framework of the two by two matrix was used to further analyze the data. This three level data analysis provides triangulation to insure validity of interpretation.

Findings

The quantitative data answered the two evaluation questions and sub-questions previously presented and based upon the findings of the study, it appears that the Youth Court Program is working. The number of JFO's who participated in Youth Court Trial Program during 1998-1999 fiscal year as defendants was 323. Interestingly, the total number of cases heard for the 1996-1997 year was 344, while in 1997-1998 it was 313 cases. Thus, there was a 9% decline in cases from 1996-1997 to 1997-1998, which may have been caused by the simultaneous institution of Teen Arbitration. This decline was followed by an increased 3% in 1998-1999 with a disproportionate number of black juvenile first offenders (JFO) resulting in a reduction in the number of cases referred to the Juvenile Justice System. The percentage difference may be a function of the populations of those communities, rather than a function of the program. This data must be interpreted with caution since a three percent increase is small enough to have occurred by chance. In addition, the number of JFO's who participated in the Youth Court Trial Program was calculated by age and race, as the following tables depict.

Table 1. Case by Age.

Age at Time of Offense	Number of Cases	Percentage of Total Cases
7	0	0%
8	0	0%
9	5	2%
10	4	1%
11	17	5%
12	39	12%
13	51	16%
14	69	21%
15	42	13%
16	53	17%
17	40	12%
18	2	1%

Note. Percentages are rounded.

Table 2. Cases by Race

Race	Number of Cases	Percentage of Total Cases
Asian	1	-
African American	69	21%
White	235	73%
Hispanic	17	5%
Native American	0	0%
Other	1	-

Note. Percentages are rounded. Percentages<1% are not reported.

Some research has indicated that recidivism rates are higher for youths whose first offense occurs at a young age, since "once involved in delinquency, the younger adolescent is more likely to be influenced by delinquent peers" (Myner, Santman, Cappelletty, & Perlmutter, 1998, p. 74). Thus, since the highest percentages of the JFO's who participated in Youth Court are at the older end of the age scale, it would appear that the population served would be less likely to become re-offenders.

The race statistics reported for the Youth Court Trial Program (see Table 2) are slightly different from the statistics for race for Palm Beach County in general. In 1995, the racial breakdown of the county was 85% white, 14% black, and 1% other (Health and Human Services Planning Association, 1996). The differences in population breakdown between the overall county statistics and the program range from 7 to 12%, with more black JFO's in proportion to the population and less white ones. However, it should be noted that the communities served may have larger or smaller percentages of various racial populations than the overall county.

Community services were not established on Saturdays as was the intention; however, the juvenile first offenders had a 98 percent community service completion rate so that this goal may not be necessary. It is important to note that goals for increasing follow-up contacts need to be considered in light of the research which indicates that juvenile first offenders who received high levels of post trial services had an increased recidivism rate (Sorensen, 1978, p. 387). This increased rate was attributed to the fact that the service "may have served as a reward and increased their propensity for illegal behavior (p. 387). While there was no comparison data on the number of volunteers, there was a 72 percent retention rate for the year 1998-99. The recidivism rate for the program was calculated for 1997-98 yielding 25 percent and the rate for 1998-99 was 13 percent. It is estimated that the overall recidivism rate for juvenile offenders in the Juvenile System nationally is 41 percent (Stevenson, et al., 1996).

One of the goals of the program was to recruit and train more volunteers. In August of 1998, 72 youth volunteers were trained to work in the Youth Court Trial Program. Of those, 52 were still volunteering at the end of the fiscal year yielding a retention rate of 72%. A total of 62 adult volunteers participated in the Program during the 1998-1999 fiscal year. No data was available on the number of volunteers from prior years and as a consequence, no comparisons could be made.

The program did not pay for any of the referral services as was the goal of the program. The number of referrals to outside services was small, with a total of 48 or 15% of the cases. There was a 100% completion rate for those services.

The database developed to track information did not break down the JFO's offenses by cateogry to determine the most and least prevalent offense categories served by the Youth Court Trial Program. Data was listed by naming the offense (e.g., shoplifting) only. Additionally, the overall number of sanctions was calculated by naming the offense, but was not calculated by the type of offense. The number of sanctions given, JFO's receiving the sanction, JFO's with the sanction cancelled, and the number of JFO's completing the sanction with the percentage rate are identified in Table 3.

Table 3. JFO's Sanctions

Sanction Type	**Number of JFO's Given Sanction**	**Number of JFO's Whose Sanction was Cancelled**	**Number/Percentage of JFO's Completing Sanction**
Apology Letter	190	1	186-99%
Community Service	291	8	276-98%
Counseling	61	1	58-97%
Curfew	38	1	35-100%
Drug Test	69	2	66-99%
Essay	177	4	170-98%
"Growing Together"	6	0	6-100%
Jury Duty	223	5	214-98%
Library Card	6	0	6-100%
Other	43	0	41-95%
Referrals	42	0	42-100%
Report Cards	5	0	5-100%
Restitution	37	1	36-100%

The following findings, extrapolated from the qualitative data, were perceived as positive outcomes and benefits of the program. The JFO's had a "second chance" opportunity avoiding a criminal record and received valuable "lessons learned" through their participation in the total youth court

experience. A positive redirection in JFO's lives occurred as a result of the law enforcement relationship with JFOO's and community service sanctions.

The many positive outcomes of the program far outweigh the few weaknesses in it. Particularly noteworthy was the commitment of all the Juvenile First Offender Officers. Despite heavy caseloads, they worked to develop law enforcement relationships with youth that were supportive in nature. This relationship, along with the community service sanctions, were viewed as critical components to the youth offenders garnering program benefits, especially redirection of their lives into law-abiding behavior (Williamson, Chalk, & Knepper, 1993). It was interesting to note that the majority of interviewees indicated that an offender's success was not based on a particular type of offense committed, but rather on the personal characteristics of the youth and their families. The interviewees identified some of these characteristics of the youth being perceived as recognizing the wrong committed, having remorse, and having set future goals. The literature on youth offenders corroborates this profile as Daley and Onwuegbuzie (1995) found that attitude played a large part in juvenile delinquency.

There were four perceived weaknesses identified in the program. These were a need for more training for student attorneys, although some training was provided. Heavy case loads and record keeping was viewed as a weakness, as was the burnout and turnover of staff. Finally, courtroom space was perceived to be lacking.

Implications for Teacher Educators

The educational role of youth courts is to inform and educate young people about the law in our democracy and about their role as active citizens. Paralleling the goals of schools, youth courts strive to provide participants with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be positive and active contributors to our society. Youth courts that handle only school referrals are receiving increasing attention from educators who are looking for ways to improve students' citizenship skills and decrease problematic behavior. Schools may benefit from looking at models of community youth courts. Educator advocacy is critical to the functioning of youth courts due to the fact that the volunteers often are recruited from the schools. Educators must be aware of these law related education programs to support these community endeavors or to initiate youth courts within the school structure.

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